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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 000692

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PK](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#)
SUBJECT: SECURITY AND THE CAMPAIGN IN PAKISTAN

REF: ISLAMABAD 613

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Inter-party election violence has a long, painful history in Pakistan, but suicide bombings do not. The suicide bombing that welcomed Benazir Bhutto home on October 18 led the government to issue new restrictions on large political rallies. While opposition parties first derided the restrictions as an attempt by the government to restrict campaigning, a series of suicide attacks have convinced all parties to restrict their activities and demand greater government protection for opposition candidates.

¶2. (C) The militants who appear determined to undermine the government by discrediting the electoral process are equal opportunity bombers. In the past year, they have threatened or attacked President Musharraf, his former Minister of Interior (twice), Jamiat Ulema-E-Islam (JUI-F) leader Fazlur Rehman, Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif, leaders of the Pashtun-based Awami National Party (ANP), and, of course, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto. The post-assassination day violence that swept Sindh, while largely organized by criminal elements, left the public jittery and cost billions of rupees in damage. Meanwhile, Pakistanis coped with a significant increase in militant activities seeping out of the tribal areas into settled districts like Swat.

¶3. (C) This week, after the end of mourning for Bhutto, all the major parties resumed holding small rallies across the country, but the pall of suicide bombings has dampened the campaign. Parties are relying more on posters, radio and TV ads, and SMS messages than on the huge rallies of the past. Fears of violence on election day may reduce voter turnout. Ongoing militant activity will delay polls in Swat. Some analysts are predicting post-election violence if Bhutto's party does not win, as is widely expected. To calm the public, the GOP is deploying over 80,000 Army and paramilitary soldiers at polling stations deemed "sensitive."
End Summary.

¶4. (C) The suicide bombing in Karachi that welcomed Benazir Bhutto home on October 18 set the tone for what has been a violent campaign season. Inter-party violence is almost a tradition in Pakistan, but suicide bombings are not. In response, Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) published a code of conduct, which required that parties provide sufficient notification to local authorities before any

rallies. The caretaker Ministry of Interior went further, announcing that political parties would actually have to seek permission from security agencies before scheduling rallies. Again, on January 16, the government issued a "Security Advisory for Political Leadership" requesting candidates to take specific actions to minimize risk to their safety.

¶5. (C) Opposition parties initially cried foul, seeing the new rules as a restriction on their freedom of speech and assembly. Since then, several opposition candidates have alleged that authorities have used the new rules to stall or refuse their requests to hold rallies. Following this initial bravado, however, came more attacks.

¶6. (C) On December 21, 2007, a suicide bomber attacked a gathering at a Charsaddah mosque for the second time in a year, intending to kill former Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao. Sherpao is leader of a Pakistan People's Part (PPP) faction allied with Musharraf. This followed a similar attack in Charsaddah earlier in the year. Since then, attendees of Sherpao campaign events are required to go through metal detectors and remain seated during his speeches.

¶7. (S/NF) Early on December 27 (the day of Bhutto's assassination), another Rawalpindi rally for the other main opposition party PML-N was attacked just before party leader Nawaz Sharif arrived, and on January 24, police found and defused an IED planted in the road Sharif was to take en route to a rally in Peshawar. Sharif told Ambassador that the government warned him he is "number one on the terrorists' hit list" but he questioned whether the threat was real or an attempt by the government to restrict his campaigning. More recently, however, a PML-N campaign

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official told CG Lahore that Sharif was less concerned because of "assurances from friends in Saudi Arabia."

¶8. (C) Bhutto's assassination sparked widespread violence in her home province of Sindh, resulting in over 40 deaths and billions of rupees in damages. Although much of the damage appears to have been organized by criminals, the riots left the public jittery, and key leaders have demanded that the GOP deploy the Army on election day to prevent further violence. GOP mishandling of the assassination investigation undermined public confidence in the government--in a recent poll, 62% said they thought the government was responsible. Even a Scotland Yard investigation supporting the government's conclusion on the cause of death does not seem to have altered public perceptions.

¶9. (C) Even JUI-F leader Fazlur Rehman has been threatened by extremists. As recently as February 13, the GOP warned the maulana that his life was in danger, providing him with a sketch of a terror suspect. Rehman has steadily increased his personal security throughout the campaign season and, upon receiving this latest news, called an emergency meeting of the JUI-F leadership. His security was reportedly upped yet again, though he also warned that if something happened to him, it would be because of inadequate security arrangements by the GOP. He decided it was time to make a quick pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. Police arrested a 16-year old suspected bomber on February 3 for plotting to kill Rehman.

¶10. (U) In February, there were suicide attacks on rallies of the Pashtun-based ANP party in Karachi, Charsaddah and Mirali killing provincial ANP leaders and supporters.

On the Campaign Trail

¶11. (C) It is not only the parties' top leadership who is being targeted. Every day, there is news of an attack on a national or provincial level candidate and/or a warning from the GOP of an impending attack. In early January, police in

Punjab reportedly disrupted a planned attack against the former Tourism and Women's Development Minister, who is contesting elections in Mianwali. Later in the month, responding to threat reports, the government provided the former Minister of Information and Railways with a bullet-proof vehicle and a squad of anti-terrorism police.

¶12. (SBU) Campaigning in Pakistan, according to various party contacts, has changed since that first attack on Bhutto October 18. In the days following Bhutto's assassination, PPP contacts reported that their party would rely much more heavily on TV ads to project the image of their leader and to support the rest of the ticket. Only a few rallies would be planned and, hopefully, in a controlled environment. Other parties too have moved from the traditional "ground game" of rallies and car caravans to an "air game" of TV/radio spots, SMS messages and posters/banners.

¶13. (U) In a survey by Pakistani NGO Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) -- working in nearly all of the districts nationwide -- the organization found that not just party leaders but also local candidates have curtailed their activities. Also, FAFEN found that attendance at rallies was down compared to other election cycles. Candidates are instead "campaigning cautiously by going door-to-door, holding corner meetings, small rallies, erecting posters and banners, and wall chalking." An IRI poll, released February 11, confirmed that over 60 percent of Pakistanis' primary source of information on the upcoming elections was TV, while only a small percentage said rallies, candidates' visits or other traditional forms of campaigning.

Candidate Protection

¶14. (C) In the wake of Bhutto's assassination, key leaders including PPP Co-Chairman and Benazir widower Asif Zardari have demanded and received additional protection from the GOP. Nawaz Sharif returned from exile to Pakistan on November 25 with an armored car, courtesy of the Saudis. Still, PPP leaders like Amin Faheem still have little or no

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protection. Most party headquarters have no screening of any kind for visitors or staff.

Fears of Post-Election Violence

¶15. (C) The Election Commission and the media have warned that fears of violence on election day will reduce voter turnout, and most believe a low turnout would benefit the ruling party. Some analysts are predicting post-election violence if Bhutto's party does not win, as is widely expected. To calm public fears, the GOP is deploying over 80,000 Army and paramilitary soldiers to supplement traditional police protection. Of the 65,000 polling stations across the country, over 8,923 have been deemed "most sensitive" and rated on a 2, 4, or 6 scale, depending on how many soldiers are supposed to be at each polling station.

¶16. (C) Comment: Inter-party election violence has a long, painful history in Pakistan, but suicide bombings do not. This has been a bloody campaign season, and we expect more violence in the days leading up to and on election day. The likelihood of post-election violence will depend on who wins, how the parties control their supporters and how the government reacts.